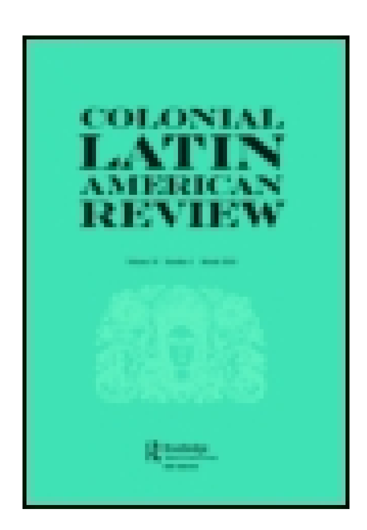


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Economic Perspectives from the Center and the Periphery

Havana and the Fleet System: Trade and Growth in the Periphery of the Spanish Empire, 1550–1610*

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By the end of the sixteenth century Havana was a crucial maritime center of the Spanish empire in the Americas. Contemporaries referred to the city as "the key ... to the New World", "the best port in the World", and the "throat" of the Indies.[1] Its privileged geographic location was officially recognized by the Crown with the organization of the *flota* system in 1561, which transformed Havana into the meeting point for all the ships returning to Europe from the New World. Veracruz hosted the fleet of Nueva España, and Cartagena and Portobelo the fleet of Tierra Firme, but Havana was the only place in the Americas where both fleets came together for the return to Europe.

Havana's designation as the official gathering point for the fleets has shaped historians' vision of the city. Prior to the late 1700s, when the city became the main export port for Cuba's emerging plantation economy, Havana has been defined by modern historians as merely a transit station for the fleets, a "factory", and a service enclave of the empire's trading network in the colonial world which languished during the inter-fleet period (Lufríu 1930; Friedländer 1944; Ely 1960; Pino-Santos 1964; Masó y Velázquez 1976).[2] "Colonial Havana, rendezvous port for the homegoing fleets, *was not a mercantile* but a *service* city with its port functions at the mercy of the erratic schedule of the fleet system" (Morse 1984, 2:91).[3] Nor was Havana the only case that fits this characterization, since according to Socolow and Johnson the Spanish empire was characterized by the lack of "true" mercantile centers. Its commercial organization "imitated and was subordinated to the administrative structure", although some exceptions "are to be found" (1981, 40). Was sixteenth-century Havana one of them?

Modern historians' vision of the city as a peripheral service post of the empire in the Americas has, surprisingly enough, no counterpart in the perceptions of

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contemporary observers. They referred to Havana not only as a maritime or service center, but also as a major colonial *trading* center through which merchandise imported from Europe was distributed to other territories, and American products were re-exported to Europe (Champlain 1859, 44 [Champlain visited Havana in 1602]; BL, Harl. Mss., 2334, 89 [Miscellaneous notes 1622]; Laet 1640 [1625], 18; Heylyn 1657 [1652], 1097). Route manuals of the period included detailed descriptions of how to get to Havana from such different points as Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Campeche (Yucatán), San Juan de Ulúa and Cartagena. About fifty to sixty percent of all the routes described in the Americas had to do with the city (Figueiredo 1609; Hakluyt 1600, 603–13).[4]

That Havana had been designated by the Crown as the return center of the fleet system is of course true, as is the fact that such designation provided legal recognition to patterns in early Atlantic maritime movement which were already well established.[5] But that is not the question. Rather it is to establish to what extent the city was in fact *just* a service point for the fleet system. That is, what were the consequences of being the return point of the fleets? What opportunities did it open for the city's inhabitants? Did Havana become the "very mercantile" town referred to by contemporaries?

This paper will argue that, *because* of its designation as the return station for the fleets and its service role within the empire, Havana did become an important trading center in the late 1500s. The unique re-export capacity of the town, which could send goods to Europe in any of the fleets, generated an active inter-colonial shipping and trade movement within the Caribbean. On the other hand, in order to guarantee Havana's crucial role within the empire the Crown invested heavily on its defense, making the city one of the best fortified in the New World. The influence of these factors—shipping, mercantile activities, defense—explain in turn Havana's demographic and urban growth during the same period.

It is now widely acknowledged that inter-colonial trade played an important role in the economic life of the colonies. The economic centers (mainly mining centers) of the empire generated a demand that was met through a complex system of intra-regional and inter-regional trade relations which fostered some regional integration. These patterns are particularly clear for Mexico, Central America and Peru (Assadourian 1982; Bakewell 1971; Van Bath 1979; Florescano 1979). Intra-Caribbean trade, however, has received less attention, largely because of our insufficient knowledge about the internal evolution of Caribbean colonies during the second half of the sixteenth century.[6] With the shift of imperial priorities to the viceroyalties and the establishment of the fleet system, Caribbean colonies were reduced to a subordinate position as part of the "periphery" of the colonial world. They were, in Chaunu's (1983) words, "abandoned". This period is then usually characterized for the region as one of "crisis" or "decadence", a context in which inter-colonial contacts do not seem to play any important role (González González 1982; Bosh 1983). It is true that with the establishment of the fleet system Caribbean colonies' direct access to Spain was restricted and that, in the face of such a situation, they increasingly turned to illegal trade relations with other European nations (Cassá 1978, 101; Moya Pons 1977, 99–108; Andrews 1978, 79–80). But two important elements

are usually overlooked. First, the "abandoned" colonies resisted their exclusion from the legal trade routes, establishing an intra-Caribbean trade with those regions that had direct access to the fleets (Cartagena, Nombre de Dios/Portobelo, Havana). Second, contraband also stimulated those links, for the main centers of contraband (the northwest of La Española, the southeast of Cuba, Jamaica) were also regional collecting and distributing points of merchandise. This paper will provide some evidence to support the first aspect; the second goes beyond its focus and goals.

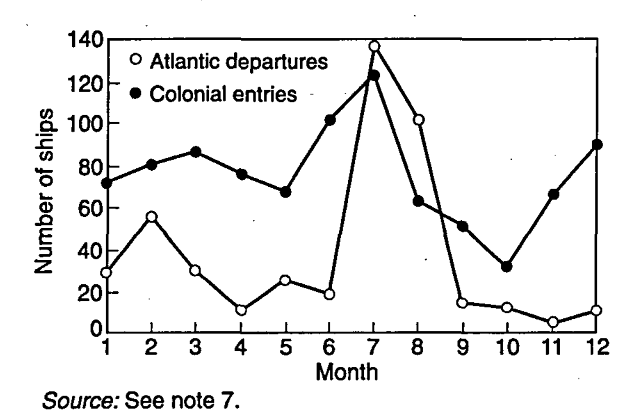
Shipping

The first and most obvious effect of the establishment of the fleet system was a dramatic increase in the movement of ships returning to Europe through Havana. According to the Chaunus (1955–1959), the number of ships registered from Havana to Seville multiplied sixfold, from a yearly average of about eight ships during the period 1511–1560 to almost fifty in the 1560s. This figure doubled again by the 1590s. These increases continued unabated until the first quarter of the next century, when the fleet system began its disastrous seventeenth-century decline. In all, 1,537 ships entered Havana's port between 1572 and 1610, of which 64 percent came from other colonial territories, 33 percent from Seville, the Canary Islands and Africa, and 3 percent from other Cuban ports. It should be noted that these figures refer to those ships for which some mercantile transaction was registered in Havana, and do not include those—mainly with the fleets—which used the port as a mere returning point to Europe.[7]

Although a substantial proportion of the incoming ships did return to Europe with the fleets,[8] an increasingly important inter-colonial shipping movement was also generated; 22 percent of the outgoing ships from 1578 to 1610 were headed to other colonial territories, and another 4 percent went to Cuban ports. A full quarter of the departing ships did not have Seville as their destination. And the proportion of the inter-colonial movement in the total departures increased from 14 percent in the decade 1586–1995 to 25 percent in 1601–1610.[9]

Havana's maritime movement was basically American in origin, whereas departures were mainly European in destination. Havana was the linking point between the inter-colonial and the Atlantic maritime movements and, as we shall see, this linking role was not restricted to the transit of ships.

These two maritime circuits—inter-colonial and trans-Atlantic—were also related in chronological terms. The fleet system did create a shipping season in the city, but the idea of a dead Havana during the inter-fleet period is not accurate. Despite the strong influence of the fleet system, Havana's port maintained high levels of activity throughout the year (Figure 1). The return movement to Europe was strongly concentrated in two months—July and August—and, not surprisingly, the incoming inter-colonial movement peaked in June and July. That made the summer the peak period of maritime activity in the city, with hundreds of ships present, and thousands of sailors and passengers. But even before the summer shipping season, Havana's port was far from dead. Total monthly arrivals from other colonial territories averaged 80 ships from January to May, increasing to 100 in June and 120 in July, the peak month for



Source: See note 7.

FIGURE 1. Seasonal shipping. Havana's total monthly figures 1578–1610.

American entries. Arrivals then declined from August to October, the hurricane season. But even then the port was not dead, and arrivals increased again in the final two months of the year.

Commerce

The linking role of the city between inter-colonial and Atlantic maritime movements was not restricted to the transit of ships through its harbor. Havana was used as a trading center for the export of colonial products to Europe and, to a lesser degree, for the re-export of European products to other colonies and to the Cuban interior. The city thus became a linking center of three different and inter-related commercial circuits: Atlantic, inter-colonial and internal within Cuba. Havana was, indeed, the "very mercantile" town referred to by contemporaries.

Table 1 presents the summary figures of Havana's trade with the Atlantic sector (Seville, Canary Islands and Africa), other colonial territories and other Cuban ports. In all, Havana's notarial records register 6,116 transactions of import and export of merchandise (including slaves), representing a value greater than 15 million reales, an average of about 650,000 reales per year. And our figures are far from complete. Given the deficiencies of our data (see Appendix 1), it is reasonable to estimate that actual figures were approximately three times higher than those mentioned above, so that during this period the real value of Havana's total trade was probably close to 45–50 million reales, with yearly averages of more than two million reales.[10]

Table 1 shows the main patterns of the city's trade and the proportion of each sector—the Atlantic (55 percent), inter-colonial (35 percent) and regional (10 percent)—in the total volume of transactions (imports and exports). The trade surplus within the Atlantic sector was due to the special character of the city's trade with Seville, where Havana sent large volumes of colonial products previously imported from other colonial ports. That surplus confirms the re-export activity of the city because, as we shall see later, most of the goods traded were not locally produced. In many cases those goods were traded by a transient

TABLE 1. Havana trade by sector and country, 1578–1610 (thousands of reales)

	Imports (1)	Exports (2)	Difference (2 – 1)
Total	8,764.80	6,686.83	– 2,077.97
Atlantic	4,110.40	4,472.59	362.19
Seville	2,639.52	3,953.56	1,314.04
Canary Islands	898.40	519.03	– 379.37
Africa	572.48	0.00	– 572.48
Inter-colonial	3,939.51	1,433.18	– 2,506.33
Mexico total	2,121.18	449.48	– 1,671.70
Veracruz	1,332.50	237.75	– 1,094.75
Yucatán	103.23	122.18	18.95
Unknown	685.45	89.55	– 595.90
Central America*	181.46	37.26	– 144.20
Panama	209.61	59.95	– 149.66
Cartagena	363.15	70.99	– 292.16
Venezuela	9.72	0.84	– 8.88
I. Margarita	32.47	5.27	– 27.20
Jamaica	13.26	9.57	– 3.69
Puerto Rico	176.53	30.56	– 145.97
La Española	115.59	95.94	– 19.65
Florida	584.56	668.80	84.24
Other/unknown	131.98	4.52	– 127.46
Cuba	714.89	781.06	66.17
Remedios	54.96	44.98	– 9.98
Trinidad	53.48	39.00	– 14.48
Sancti Spiritus	102.83	58.71	– 44.12
Puerto Principe	194.53	269.06	74.53
Bayamo	269.32	241.00	– 28.32
Santiago	13.87	114.32	100.45
Baracoa	13.04	3.09	– 9.95
Other/unknown	12.86	10.90	– 1.96

*Includes Honduras and Guatemala
Source: ANC, PNH, ER, 1578–1579, 1585–1593, 1595–1610.

population that came to the city attracted by its mercantile opportunities; 52 percent of the total exports from Havana to Seville were accounted for by transactions between non-residents, that is, without the intervention of Havana *vecinos*. If the trade surplus within the Atlantic sector was not larger it was because of the unique features of the Africa trade, which provided slaves to the local market, and to which the city had no (legal) direct access.

The Atlantic export surplus was compensated for by the great inter-colonial trade deficit of the city, which amounted to two and a half million reales during the analyzed period. Havana's most important American supplier was Mexico, which provided 54 percent of its total inter-colonial imports. This amount represented 80 percent of the imports from Seville. However, only 31 percent of Havana's inter-colonial exports went to the Mexican territory, so the trade deficit with Mexico amounted to more than a million and a half reales, 80 percent of Havana's total trade imbalance. Havana also had negative trade balances with

the Central American territories (Honduras and Guatemala), the Caribbean islands (La Española, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Margarita) and the region of Tierra Firme which, through the ports of Cartagena, Portobelo and Nombre de Dios, sent colonial products to Havana from as far away as Chile.

The only place in the Americas with which Havana had a substantial positive trade balance was Florida. In total volume (including both imports and exports), the trade with Florida was second in importance only to that with Mexico, amounting to 23 percent of Havana's inter-colonial commerce. Contrary to the general inter-colonial pattern, however, Havana showed a trade surplus with Florida of more than 80,000 reales during the period. The singularity of this trade is explained, as will be seen below, by the peculiar settlement pattern of the region.

The linking role of Havana between the inter-colonial and Atlantic trade networks is further evidenced by the sort of merchandise traded (Table 2). Each circuit provided and demanded very different products, thus allowing a high level of complementarity between them. From the Atlantic side Havana received mainly textiles (24 percent), African slaves (20 percent), wine (18 percent), shipping supplies, weapons and other manufactured products. Given the strong presence of these products among the city's exports to other colonial territories and to the Cuban interior, its role as a distribution center in the Caribbean, mentioned by contemporaries, is confirmed by these data. Twenty-one percent of Havana's inter-colonial exports was composed of wine, textiles, ironware and weapons, all previously imported from Europe. These products were also well represented among the city's exports to other Cuban ports. Moreover, more than a third of those exports, or more accurately re-exports, to other colonial territories was composed of American bullion that the city redistributed within the region. Not all American silver reached Spain.

As mentioned above, Havana was primarily a re-exporting center of colonial products to Europe. So it is not surprising to find that while bullion made up

TABLE 2. Percentage distribution, merchandise traded by sector, 1578–1610

Merchandise	Atlantic		Inter-colonial		Cuba	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
Foodstuff	1	3	10	21	7	1
Wine	18	1	—	6	—	12
Bullion, money	10	74	63	40	41	20
Hides	—	5	1	—	26	1
Wood	—	1	1	—	1	—
Dyes, medicinal	—	—	1	—	—	—
Ships, shipping supplies	6	9	1	3	5	6
Textiles, footwear	24	—	3	4	—	32
Ironware, weapons	1	—	—	11	—	1
Slaves	20	—	9	5	14	16
Other	20	7	11	10	6	11

Source: ANC, PNH, ER, 1578–1579, 1585–1593, 1595–1610.

three quarters of the total value of the city's exports to Seville, it also represented 63 percent of its inter-colonial imports. Hides, which amounted to 5 percent of the exports to Spain, were also well represented among the products sent by other colonies to the city, although a significant part came in fact from Cuba itself. Other significant exports were ships (mostly constructed in the local shipyards, though some were built in other Caribbean shipyards), wood (also produced both in Cuba and in other colonial territories), food and spices.

A detailed analysis of the products imported by Havana from other colonial territories also shows that some specialization in production took place in the colonies and that it permitted the emergence of regional economic links. In order of importance, Caribbean colonies sent to Havana products that could in turn be re-exported to Spain, products for local consumption including Havana's large transient population, and products that could be reallocated to other markets within the region. If the last category is less important in quantitative terms it is largely because those regions also maintained trade relations among themselves. Incoming ships from other colonial territories represented 75 percent of arrivals in Cartagena (1595–1599), 70 percent in La Española (1603–1631), 40 percent in Puerto Rico (1621–1632), 65 percent in Nombre de Dios (1550–1570) and 55 percent in Veracruz (1590–1594) (Borrego Plá 1983, 68; Gil-Bermejo 1983, 129; Vila Vilar 1974, 41; Chaunu and Chaunu 1955–1959, VI2: 714–94, 814–30). Inter-colonial trade was equally important for Panama, Jamaica, Venezuela and Guatemala (Arcila-Farías 1946, 1950; Mena García 1984; Morales Padrón 1952; de la Peña 1992). In this sense, Caribbean "crisis" or "decadence" should be qualified for, as Pérez Herrero (1987, 809–10) argues, such crisis did not impede an adjustment to the new commercial realities, adjustment that certainly included, but was not restricted to, the practice of contraband.

There were significant differences in the character and intensity Havana's relationships with other colonies. The city became dependent on the supply capacity of certain colonial regions and products—Mexico and food being clear examples—and at the same time operated as a supplier for other regionally weaker markets, such as Florida.

Mexico and Yucatán provided the local market with foodstuffs to help feed the transient population that gathered at the city with the fleets, a fact that has already been established by previous historians (Le Riverend 1954; Pérez Herrero 1987, 1992; Marrero 1975; Sanz 1982). Yucatán also used Havana to introduce some of its local products into the Atlantic trade, such as wood—especially the dye-wood *palo de Campeche*—, hides, and local textiles (the so-called *mantas de tributo*, produced by the Indian population of the region). The Mexico/Veracruz region sent to Havana large quantities of silver and Oriental products, which were in turn re-exported to other Caribbean colonies and to Spain. The advantage of sending goods to Havana—even from a place as centrally located as Veracruz—is explained by its capacity to re-export those goods in *any* of the fleets, indeed a unique advantage. Havana did not have much to offer in return to Mexico/Veracruz; to Yucatán it sent mainly European products, such as wine and spices, and also locally produced ships.

Central American colonies maintained a much less intense commercial ac-

tivity with Havana. Imports from the region came mainly from Honduras, and consisted primarily of silver. Although at a modest level, the region had revitalized its mining activities by the late sixteenth century, and from the 1580s to 1610 it produced about 7,000 *marcos* (1 *marco* = 8 oz.) per year. After silver, hides were Honduras' most important export to Havana, followed by small quantities of *añil*, a blue dye, and sarsaparilla, a plant of alleged curative properties (McLeod 1973). Given the products traded, it is clear that Central American exports to Havana were destined to the European markets, and that trade relations between them were based on the re-export possibilities of the city. Neither Honduras nor Guatemala seem to have functioned as suppliers for Havana's local market.

La Española sent hides to be re-exported to Spain and foodstuffs (mainly cassava) for local consumption in Havana. La Española's most important export to Havana, however, was slaves (39 percent), probably acquired through participation in the illegal trade networks of the Caribbean. The island of Margarita's trade with the city was also concentrated on a few items, particularly its famous pearls.

The trade with Florida had special characteristics, given the peculiar pattern of settlement in the region in the late sixteenth century and its close institutional, military and economic ties with Havana. Florida was a military outpost with a garrison of about 300 men in the 1580s, and Havana played a leading role in keeping it supplied since the 1560s. This role was clearly recognized in the appointment of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, then *adelantado* of Florida, as governor of Cuba in 1567; one of the arguments used by the Crown to justify the appointment was that "Florida had to be provided with many necessary things from Cuba". Havana's treasury officials were frequently ordered to send supplies to Florida garrisons and in 1577, when Baltasar del Castillo Ahedo (a Havana *vecino*) was sent by the Crown to visit the forts in Florida, the soldiers at Saint Augustine asked him to return immediately to the city to guarantee a prompt delivery of food and other supplies (Sluiter 1985; AHMCH, ACAHO, April, 1567 and June, 1568; AGI, Contaduría, 1174 [*Real cédula* February 2, 1568 and October 16, 1570]; Connor 1925–1930, 1:218).

Despite its small population and productive capacity Florida became a very important market for Havana traders. As early as 1566–1570 Havana exported merchandise to Florida worth close to half a million reales, 94 percent of which was made up by food (corn, flour, beef and pork meat, cassava, salt, bacon, honey, pumpkins, and oil), live animals (pigs, chickens, cows, horses and goats) and wine. The remaining 6 percent was made up of textiles and footwear previously imported to the city.[11] Products for another 700,000 reales were sent, according to our data from the notarial records, from 1578 to 1610. Foodstuffs (including wine) remained the fundamental trade item (42 percent), followed by weapons (23 percent), textiles (6 percent), ships and shipping supplies (2 percent) and a large variety of manufactured products.

Florida did not have local products to exchange for all these goods, although by the 1590s small quantities of sassafras were exported from the region to Havana. What Florida offered in exchange was the silver it received through the *situado*, established in 1570 as a regular subsidy to its forts and garrisons and

paid by one of the colonial treasuries (first Tierra Firme, then Veracruz and Mexico). According to Paul Hoffman's (1980, 215) figures, the Crown spent a yearly average of 302,000 reales from 1566 to 1570 to pay for the defense of the region, so at least 33 percent of it had been used to pay for the supplies received from Havana, which amounted in 1566–1570 to 700,000 reales. This proportion had declined by the period 1579–1610, but still about 20 percent of the Florida *situado* was used to pay for Havana's exports. It is then understandable why silver made up 95 percent of the value of all Florida's exports to Havana.[12] In fact, in many occasions part of the Florida *situado* did not leave Havana and was used by the royal officials of Saint Augustine to pay for goods and services previously acquired in the local market to supply the garrison (ANC, PNH, ER, 1595, 157; AGI, Justicia, 980, num. 3 ["Autos hechos en la villa de la Habana" 1570]).

The slave trade had its own patterns. Although only 470 contracts for incoming slaves are registered in the notarial records, the real number of imported slaves was in fact much higher (de la Fuente 1990). Our figures, again, understate the total volume of trade, but they do display its major patterns and geographic distribution. Forty-eight percent of the incoming slaves came to the city directly from Africa in the late 1590s, after the Crown granted the slave *asiento* to the Portuguese Pedro Gómez Reinel in 1595, for Havana was one of the legal American ports of destination. Havana was not a regional slave trading center of importance, but the Portuguese *asentistas* always kept commission agents (*factores*) in the city, even after the Crown ordered that all slaves should enter the Americas through Cartagena and Veracruz (1604). Cartagena, probably the biggest slave center in the Caribbean during the so-called "Portuguese period" of the slave trade (1595–1640), provided another 20 percent of the slaves imported to Havana.[13] But slaves came also from regions that took part in the Caribbean contraband trade, such as La Española, Puerto Rico, Margarita and Bayamo (in the South-East of Cuba). In all, 34 percent of the imported slaves came to the city through the inter-colonial slave-trade routes of the Caribbean,[14] and 18 percent from other Cuban ports.

In spite of its importance in the sixteenth-century Caribbean, inter-colonial trade was limited by at least three elements during this period. The first was privateering. It is difficult to measure the disruptive effect of this factor on the Caribbean trade, but Hoffman (1980) reports that at least 250 ships were lost to pirates in the region during the 1536–1585 period. A large number of pirates operated along the northwest coast of Cuba, and many ships coming from other colonial territories to Havana fell victim to them.[15] A second limiting factor was the small size of the Caribbean colonial markets. The massive emigration from the Antilles to the more attractive continental viceroyalties depleted the demographic resources of the region, which by the mid-sixteenth century faced the real threat of a total depopulation.

Finally, the Crown actively sought to restrict this trade, although, as with many other aspects of colonial life, royal policy on this subject was neither stable nor coherent. The underlying principle of these regulations was to guarantee a high demand for the goods carried by the fleets in the main ports of *la Carrera de Indias* (the official trade route): Cartagena, Nombre de Dios,

Veracruz and Honduras. *Reales cédulas* of 1565, 1589 and 1610 prohibited re-exports of European products imported into the Caribbean colonies to other regions in the Indies, especially to the main ports mentioned above. However, exceptions to those decrees were so numerous that it is hard to establish a clear-cut division between what was legal at a given moment and what was not. Almost immediately after the 1565 general prohibition, in 1568 and 1569, it was revoked for La Española and Cuba. The absolute prohibition was restored in 1589, but modified in 1591, when re-exports from the islands were permitted to other colonies except the main ports previously mentioned. Further concessions were made in 1602 and 1607, when re-exports of food and wine were allowed to any other colonial territory, including those previously excluded. But in 1610 the absolute prohibition was restored again (Encinas 1946 [1596], 4:92–93, 167; *Recopilación* 1973 [1681] [Ley 16 and 17, T. 42, Libro 9]; Veitía Linage 1945 [1671], 166–68).

In addition to these general regulations, others were passed concerning specific products and places. In the case of Havana, a 1575 *cédula* prohibited the registration in the city of silver and gold from other colonial territories, but the ban was temporarily lifted (for six years) in 1589; this made theoretically illegal any import of bullion into Havana and its re-export to Spain (and of course to other colonies), at least prior to 1589 and after 1595. Imports of cochineal from Yucatán were also restricted, and ordered to be sent to Spain via Veracruz (Solórzano y Pereyra n.d. [1647], 5:25, 31; *Recopilación* 1973 [1681] [Ley 18, T. 42, Libro 9]). Our data, however, do not suggest any concrete impact of these regulations on Havana's trading movement.

Only occasionally did these prohibitions deal with the exchange of colonial products (except silver); rather, they focussed on the inter-colonial trade in European goods that had been sent from Seville to the Americas. The whole idea was to guarantee that, when the fleets arrived at the main ports, there would be enough demand for European merchandise. Local products were more freely exchanged, and in this sense the royal policy was more stable and coherent. In the Cuban case, *cédulas* of 1516, 1518, 1539, 1578, 1586 and 1599 clearly sanctioned the legality of a trade based on the so-called *frutos de la tierra* (ANC, Academia de la Historia, 29, num. 215 [*real cédula*, December 29, 1516]; Marrero 1975, 2:136).

Defense

By the late sixteenth century Havana was one of the best fortified cities in the New World, with three forts manned by a permanent garrison of about 450. Additionally, the port was protected by a heavy iron chain, an element with as much military as symbolic value. For more than two hundred years, well into the eighteenth century, the city remained impregnable to foreign attacks.

This defensive system was intimately connected to the role of the city as the gathering point for the fleets. Whenever military construction took place in Havana, that role was explicitly mentioned. The fleet system had the advantage of giving protection to the convoys and of facilitating the collection of taxes and

other fees in Seville, but it also had the clear disadvantage of making the gathering point of return an obvious target for an attack. Hence, that point needed an especially strong military protection.

What concerns us here, however, is the effect of military expenditures on the local economy. During the period 1572–1610 such expenditures represented the injection into the city of more than 21 million reales, a yearly average of 700,000.[16] This yearly infusion of silver helped finance the local market, and generated a year-round demand for good and services.

The construction of forts was a major stimulus for the local economy. The *vecinos* supplied wood, lime, and other building materials. Local artisans supplied a skilled—and very expensive—labor force, and the group grew considerably during this period, becoming a significant proportion of the total population. Other *vecinos* hired out their slaves for construction work or for more skilled activities. Still others rented the slaves brought by the Crown to construct the forts, and used them for their individual purposes. Between 1578 and 1580 these so-called royal slaves provided 33,707 workdays to local residents, who in 1580 had paid for just 60 percent of the total; royal officials were in fact subsidizing the local economy with His Majesty's labor force. Almost half of those workdays were performed by women, which indicates their usefulness in the tertiary sector of Havana's growing economy (AGI, Contaduría, 1088–81).[17]

The existence of a garrison also created a permanent demand for different services and products. Soldiers needed food, shelter, clothing, shoes, and other personal items that had to be purchased in the local market. Women—especially black women—were frequent providers of food and lodging, becoming active participants in the tertiary economy. Local merchants and shopkeepers provided the manufactured products soldiers needed, usually on credit.[18]

Other military activities had also a stimulating effect on the local economy. In the early seventeenth century the Crown built a foundry at Havana to produce artillery for the defense of the colonies. This foundry functioned with copper from the mines of *Santiago del Prado* in the eastern region of the country, and produced about 50 cannon between 1600 and 1607. But not only artillery was produced by the foundry. Despite its military purpose, the local elite took advantage of its existence and used it for the production of utensils for their emerging sugar mills, royal prohibitions against this notwithstanding. Gonzalo de la Rocha, a master carpenter who came to the city to construct the foundry in the late 1590s, ended up building sugar mills for the local elite (AGI, Santo Domingo, 100, ramo 1 [*real cédula*, September 6, 1603; Valdés to the King, July 12, 1604]; BL, Add. Mss. 13992; ANC, PNH, ER, 1598, 70; 1599, 580; 1603, 362).

From Town to City

An increasing shipping movement, a growing inter-colonial trade, first-rate defenses. These are the most obvious consequences but by no means the only ones of Havana's designation as the returning point of the fleets. The shipping and mercantile movement described above had strong impacts on Havana's

economic, social, demographic and institutional life. It is clearly beyond the reach of this paper to analyze those impacts in any systematic way, but a brief look at the internal evolution of the city indicates that the characterization of Havana as a service point of the imperial maritime network in the Americas does not tell the whole story. For, even recognizing that the fleet-generated shipping and mercantile movements lie behind Havana's life, such a characterization ignores the fundamental fact that the internal evolution of the city cannot be reduced to its propelling factor alone. Moreover, the mid-sixteenth century *town* is not necessarily equal to the early seventeenth-century *city*. When the Crown granted Havana the official designation as a "city" in 1592, it was giving legal recognition to the fact that the Havana of the late sixteenth century was, in economic, urban, social and demographic terms, different from its mid-sixteenth century predecessor.

Havana's commercial activity was not restricted to the vigorous import–export trade described above. The local market represented an important share of the total mercantile movement of the town (Table 3). In the 1580s that share was already as high as 46 percent, and this proportion kept increasing during the whole period, reaching its highest value at the beginning of the seventeenth century (62 percent). Our data show the local market growing from an estimated yearly average of about 65,000 reales in the 1580s to 83,000 reales in the 1600s although, again, real values were approximately three times as high as those suggested by these figures.

Although heavily influenced by the returning fleets, the local market was active throughout the year (Figure 2). October, the month with the lowest shipping movement (Figure 1) shows the second-highest level after August of local mercantile activity. Figure 2 also shows that the fleets may have affected Havana's non-mercantile life, although not necessarily in the sense that one would expect. Summer's active mercantile and maritime life coincided with low levels of town council activity and with low levels of marriages and procreation as well. Frequently, the *cabildo* did not meet in June and July, claiming that there were no issues to discuss ("no hay cosas que despachar"). This happened, for instance, in 1587, 1588, 1601, 1605 and 1609. In a sense, it was when the fleets were in Havana's port, not when they were away, that the city was "dead".[19]

TABLE 3. Percentage distribution, Havana's total mercantile activity by sector and period, 1578–1610

	1578–1590	1591–1600	1601–1610
Yearly average*	846.89	1,910.06	1,317.43
Local	46.5	47.4	62.1
Trade total	53.5	52.6	37.9
Atlantic	18.4	33.2	21.0
Inter-colonial	25.8	15.6	13.4
Cuba	9.3	3.8	3.5

*Thousands of reales
Source: ANC, PNH, ER, 1578–1579, 1585–1593, 1595–1610.

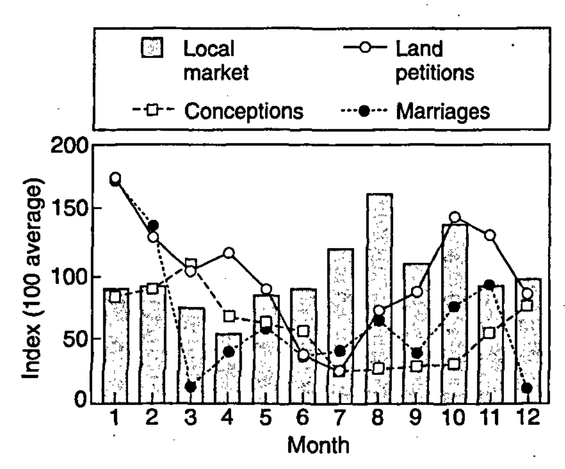


FIGURE 2. Seasonal distribution, local market and other indicators, 1550–1610.

The characterization of Havana as a returning station for the fleets in the Americas is probably accurate for the pre-1570s period. All references to the city during these years emphasize the importance of its service sector and that the only lucrative occupation its inhabitants had was to accommodate the passengers and sailors who came to the port (AGI, Contaduría, 1101 [*real cédula* October 3, 1562]; AHMCH, ACAHO, June 1562). In their absence, the village was at least partially deserted, and the *vecinos* retreated to their farms to get supplies ready for the incoming ships (Benzoni 1565, 174; AGI, Santo Domingo, 99, ramo 1 [Pérez de Angulo to the King, December 23, 1555]). The importance of the service economy is illustrated by the fact that in the 1570s—when Havana had only 60–80 *vecinos*—about 50 taverns were open in the city (AHMCH, ACAHO January 1574).

In 1555, when the village was attacked and destroyed by a French pirate, it was a rather modest one, both in urban and demographic terms. With only about 40 *vecinos*, it displayed a stone church, a hospital and a small, almost useless fort as its principal buildings. Among the houses, the predominant type was the indigenous *bohío*, made of wood and palm tree leaves. Stone houses were still an unaffordable luxury. Between 1570 and 1610, however, the urban landscape was substantially modified. The old hospital was rebuilt and a new one constructed; the church was rebuilt and improved with the support of the local elite, and a new church planned while the *vecinos* demanded to move the cathedral from Santiago to Havana. Three religious orders established monasteries in the city, another attempted it, a convent for the daughters of "honest" *vecinos* was promoted, and several public buildings were built. During this period, moreover, Havana witnessed the construction of three major forts. *Bohíos* were slowly replaced by better houses: in the years 1578–1595 *bohíos* made up 42 percent of all the houses sold in the local market, but that proportion

declined to 12 percent during 1596–1610. Reflecting these changing conditions the average price of the *bohíos* declined 40 percent between these two periods, while that of stone houses multiplied threefold.

Havana experienced considerable growth during this period. In the 1550s the village had 40 *vecinos*, and by 1570 there were just 60. Between 1570 and 1610, however, the number of *vecinos* increased tenfold, and by 1610 half of Cuba's *vecinos* lived in the city. The number of slaves increased even more, from 200 in 1544 to 6,000 in 1609, with most of this growth taking place after 1580 (de la Fuente 1990a, 1993).

Urban and demographic growth was preceded by a rush of petitions to the town council for urban lots; the peak moment for such demand was in the mid-1570s, when Havana's population was still just 70 *vecinos* (from 1573 to 1578 requests exceeded 150). Clearly, this wave of petitions does not reflect population pressure, but rather the desire of the local *vecinos* to monopolize access to urban land, which they foresaw would become increasingly valuable in the future, and to exclude newcomers from getting it free from the *cabildo*. This early land rush—which also had a rural component—is a direct reflection of the economic opportunities generated by the fleets. Urban land was needed to expand the service economy (more boarding houses, more taverns), while rural lots were necessary to produce the food supplies needed by fleets' crews and passengers. The fleets are again the driving force behind this process, but the process itself had far reaching internal consequences. Among others, it explains the consolidation of the local elite, who monopolized access to the best urban and rural lands of the region (Sorhegui 1980).

At the same time, by the late sixteenth century the local economy had grown more complex, and the service sector had lost its early predominance. Existing economic activities, such as shipbuilding, were expanded, and new ones—sugar, tobacco—were initiated. Small local shipyards had existed at least since mid-century, but it is after the 1570s that the city became an increasingly important center of shipbuilding in the colonial world, if not the most important one, with seven different shipyards in operation in the 1578–1610 period. Shipbuilding grew based on the demand generated by the city's inter-colonial contacts, but it was further stimulated by the military demands of the empire—in 1589 and 1608 the Crown ordered Havana's shipyards to construct frigates and galleons for the defense of the Indies—and by Havana's access to the *Carrera*, for at least 15 locally produced ships traveled with the fleets at the end of the century (1590–1600).[20]

Unlike shipbuilding, which is an activity that can be considered a complement of Havana's Atlantic service role, the production of both sugar and tobacco poorly fit that role. Tobacco did not become an important economic activity during this period, but 3 percent of the *estancias* (small agricultural units located in the periphery of the city) registered in the notarial records (1578–1610) included it as part of their production. During the seventeenth century it became commercially important, in spite of the Crown's efforts to restrict its production and the local authorities' complaint that its cultivation displaced other crops needed for the local market and the fleets (Le Riverend 1992; Marrero 1975).

TABLE 4. Percentage distribution, issues discussed and regulated by the *cabildo,* 1550–1610

Issues	1550–1570 (n = 422)	1571–1590 (n = 440)	1591–1610 (n = 915)
Provisioning, local market	27	22	16
Fleets and trade	4	2	1
Cabildo's activities	4	4	2
Trades, occupations	10	7	18
Urbanization	9	12	19
Aqueduct	3	5	8
Festivities, celebrations	2	3	7
Defense	12	5	2
Slavery	9	2	5
Local taxes	2	7	5
Justice	1	3	10
Others	19	28	7

Source: AHMCH, ACAHO, 1550–1610.

Neither was sugar congruent with Havana's service role. Its cultivation also prospered at the expense of subsistence agriculture. Local authorities tried to guarantee local food supplies by encouraging the production of cassava and other products, while the exploitation of forest resources for sugar production—wood was needed for the urban expansion of the city, shipbuilding and to repair fleet ships—was subjected to increasing regulation (AHMCH, ACAHO, August 1602 and July 1604; AGI, Santo Domingo, 129 [Valdés to the King, January 3, 1604]). Like military construction and shipbuilding, moreover, sugar had a strong impact on the local economy, for it fostered the emergence of several subsidiary activities. To put it in modern economic terms, it generated some internal linkages. Among others, it stimulated ceramics production, for sugar had to be "purged" in special earthenware vessels and every *ingenio* demanded a yearly supply of several hundreds of them. Sawmills, already important for shipbuilding and military constructions, became producers of wood boxes for sugar packing. And, as said above, copper utensils were made at the local foundry.[21]

The increasing complexity of the city and the inadequacy of a description centered only on its role as a returning station for the fleets is revealed by the changing concerns of the local *cabildo* during this period. Table 4 summarizes the issues discussed by the town council from 1550 to 1610, showing that they experienced a fundamental change during the sixty years under scrutiny. Almost one-third of the *cabildo*'s activity from 1550 to 1570 was related to the fleets and the local market, and to keeping the village and incoming fleets supplied with necessary products at "fair" prices. The next-most important, defense, was also associated with Havana's role as a strategic maritime base; altogether these three issues represented 43 percent of the town council's deliberative and regulatory activity. They mirror the realities and concerns of the old, poorly defended, overwhelmingly tertiary, village.

It is no coincidence that these three issues, all of which reflect Havana's imperial station role, decrease in proportional importance after the 1570s, exactly when the village starts experiencing the urban and demographic growth described above. In 1571–1590 they still represent 29 percent of the *cabildo*'s total activity, but the proportion declined to 19 percent during the 1591–1610 years. By the latter period the local council was more concerned with how to regulate and control the urban growth of the city and with the construction of its aqueduct than with fleet supplies. Defense had lost its early importance, not least because the seventeenth-century city rested behind the effective protection of its three solid forts. After the 1570s, other internal issues tended to monopolize the *cabildo*'s attention: regulation of local trades and other occupations, collection of local taxes, local festivities (most of which were religious holidays) and its varied judicial duties. Slavery, which had been a proportionally important issue during the earlier period, partially recovered its importance after the 1590s, reflecting the increase of the slave population after the 1580s.

In a few words, if by the 1550s and 1560s the thematic structure of the *cabildo*'s regulatory activity does reflect Havana's role as the continental maritime and military station for the returning fleets, after the 1590s these issues had lost their previous importance. And, it should be noted, this happened during a period characterized by a significant increase in the Atlantic maritime movement, which reached its pre-eighteenth century peak in 1580–1620 (Chaunu 1983, 222–23, 322; McCleod 1984, 370; Sanz 1979, 2:236–38). Why did the town council's focus of attention shift despite the fact that the city was still the colonial returning center of the fleets? Had Havana lost its original service function within the empire? Of course not. The answer rather lies in the fundamental changes the village experienced during these sixty years. Because of its service role, Havana was able to develop an increasingly important inter-colonial trade network, benefited from the Crown's military investments, grew in urban and demographic terms, and developed new economic activities which were not necessarily congruent with its service functions. By the 1600s, the town council's concerns reflected the growing social and economic complexity of a city which was still a service station of the empire's maritime movement, but was also a major trade center of the Spanish Caribbean and the fastest growing urban center in the Americas from 1570 to 1620 (Hardoy and Aranovich 1969). A city which was slowly starting, with the promotion of new commercial crops, a different evolution.

Appendix 1. Sources: *Protocolos Notariales de la Habana*

Trade figures have been elaborated from Havana's *protocolos notariales*, which exist at the Archivo Nacional de Cuba. 1578 is the earliest year for which records exist, but the collection is far from complete even after that date. The years 1580–1584 and 1594 are missing; moreover, those years for which data are available are not always complete. To calculate averages we have used the number of months for which information was actually available.

Furthermore, the records available belong to only one of the three notaries that existed in Havana (served by Juan Bautista Guilisasti for most of the period).

This registry contains a total of 14,986 mercantile transactions. The other two—served by Francisco del Poyo Vallejo and Luis Pérez Costilla—have disappeared. In the existing material there are frequent references to these other notaries. There is no reason to believe that the notary for which records have survived is markedly richer or poorer than the others. We presume, therefore, that it represents about one-third of the city's total notarized activities and that the total trade figures were at least three times higher than those reported by us.

Notes

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[1] Many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors refer to Havana and its port with this laudable tone. The first we have located is Fernández de Enciso ([1519] 1546, 442); for additional examples, see Hera y de la Barra (1584, 43); Van Linschoten ([1596] 1598, 222); Botero (1591, 1:226); Mireo (1613); and Ordoñez de Cevallos (1614, 240).

[2] For an opposing point of view see McNeill (1985), who shows the importance of Havana's non-peninsular trade during the early 1700s.

[3] Emphasis added. A variant of the "service" argument is to consider Havana a military post of the empire in the Americas: "[Havana] was a place of military rather than commercial importance" or "its importance was more military than commercial"; see Parry (1990, 134); and Pérez, Jr. (1988, 36).

[4] See also BNM, Mss. 3104 [Juan Escalante de Mendoza, *Itinerario de navegacion de los mares y tierras occidentales*, 1575]; and BL, Add. Mss. 28189 [Francisco Manuel, *Derrotero y sendas de tierra y sondas de la costa de la Nueva España y Tierra Firme y vuelta de las Indias a España*, 1583].

[5] As early as 1538 the Crown ordered the construction of a fort in Havana to protect the shipping movement through its harbor; see *real cédula* May 20, 1538 (Wright 1927, 1:184). And when the early system of convoys was regulated in 1543 Havana was already considered a crucial point for the colonial trade (Haring 1964, 201; Torres 1992, 45; Bordejé Morencos 1992, 88).

[6] The Spanish-language literature has devoted some attention to this issue, although primary research on the subject is badly needed; for some examples, see Ramos Pérez (1970, 173–87); García Fuentes (1991, 2:216–20); Céspedes del Castillo (1986, 153–60); and Pérez Herrero (1987, 777–810; 1992, 99–151). See also McAlister (1984, 371–73).

[7] Shipping figures were elaborated from Havana's treasury accounts contained in AGI, Contaduría, 1088–1101, 1174–1175, and from ANC, PNH, ER, 1578–1610.

[8] It is impossible to establish the exact proportion of returning ships due to the inadequacy of our data on departing ships. This is explained by the frequent tax exemptions granted by the Crown to Havana's export trade, making those ships invisible in the *Contaduría* records. Only 695—45 percent of the incoming ships—appear in our records as leaving the city.

[9] This trend was maintained during the first half of the seventeenth century, when 29 percent of the outgoing ships from Havana went to other colonial territories; this figure has been calculated using the data provided by Macías (1978, 517–629).

[10] The yearly average was calculated with the number of months for which information is actually recorded in the notarial records. In the period 1578–1610 there is information concerning 284

months, equivalent to 23.7 years (instead of 396 months for the 33 years covered). For a further explanation of the quality of the data and the need to triple our values, see appendix 1. We have presented our figures in reales, the monetary unit that appears in the notarial records most frequently, 63 percent of all transactions.

[11] These figures were calculated from the reports sent by the royal officials to the king in AGI, Contaduría, 1174.

[12] The figures of the Florida *situado* for these years are reproduced by Sluiter (1985).

[13] The *asentistas* Gómez Reinel (1595–1601), Juan Rodríguez Coutinho (1601–1603) and Gonzalo Vaez Coutinho (1604–1609) all had *factores* in Havana. ANC, PNH, ER, 1601, 3–6, 1606, 547; see also Vila Vilar (1977; 1983) and Palacios Preciado (1973).

[14] Some authors, however, claim that this trade did not exist; see, for instance, Mellafe (1973, 82); and Deive (1980, 1:257).

[15] In 1591 alone, eight ships coming from Santo Domingo to Havana were captured by British pirates in the northwestern coast of Cuba (Andrews 1964, 166).

[16] There are records for 32 of these 38 years. Defense expenditures included *situados* paid for the construction of forts, salaries and rations for the permanent garrison and other military personnel temporarily stationed at the city; occasional military expenses, and the costs of the coastal galleys (1589–1597). This global figure was obtained from Havana's treasury records contained in AGI, Contaduría, 1088–1101, 1174–1175.

[17] About the artisans and their presence in Havana see Veigas (1975).

[18] For a few examples, see ANC, PNH, ER, 1600, 731; AHMCH, ACAHO, March 1586, October 1588; AGI, Santo Domingo, 100, ramo 2 (Quero to the King, December 29, 1606).

[19] The number of procreations and marriages were calculated from HSCH, Libro Barajas de Bautismos de Españoles, 1590–1600; Libro Primero de Bautismos de Españoles, 1600–1623 and Libro Barajas de Matrimonios de Españoles, 1584–1622. To calculate procreations it was assumed that month of baptism equals month of birth (which in this period is never registered). Both marriages and baptisms include free and slave population, but baptisms of adult slaves were eliminated.

[20] The first reference to shipbuilding activities in Havana dates from 1552, when permission was requested from the *cabildo* to build a small ship to trade with Veracruz (AHMCH, ACAHO, December 1562); see also Pérez Turrado (1992, 76–83); Marrero (1975, 2:200–06); Macías (1978, 382); and García Fuentes (1991, 215).

[21] Contracts between tile masters—some of whom were slaves—and sugarmill owners are common after the 1590s in Havana's notarial records; some examples of these and other sugar-related activities in ANC, PNH, ER, 1599, 321; 1601, 440; 1603, 362; 1608, 72.

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